

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Good morning, again. I'm glad that you're all here this morning. It is a beautiful day. And on top of all that, you all remembered to set your clocks forward last night. Now, let's be kind to anyone who arrives just as we are beginning communion.

As I was looking over the passages for this week, you don't know how much I wanted to preach something about an Ostridge this morning. Oh well. Nothing came to mind. Now, if you don't know what I'm talking about then you probably need to listen just a little more closely as the passages are read. If you didn't catch it, please go back' later, when you get a chance, and read the passage from Isaiah.

What I really wanted to talk about this morning is perception. I think that that is a big part of what Paul is writing about to the church in Philippi.

Now, if that is not quite jumping out for you yet, bear with me. The passage that you heard seems to be more about pressing ahead, running the good race, and finishing strong?

Maybe somewhat like a half-time locker room pep-talk that you might get at a championship game. Well, in a way, it was about that. He was both chastising and encouraging the church.

You see, what was going on, that created the need for the Philippian church to hear that particular message, was that they were experiencing some division. They were being told by some outside sources that they needed to fall in line more closely with the church in Jerusalem. And so Paul tells them to stick with it. Stick with the faith that they have received. Run the race to obtain the goal. Never give up. Persevere!

And in order to deliver that message, he places it within the context of perception. Still not clear? How about this? Paul once used to think one thing. Then he was struck with clarity on the road to Damascus, which changed his life. It is not about the flesh any more. It is not about worldly things, from that point on, any more. It is about Christ. Change of perspective, change of perception.

Now, with his perception renewed, clarified, expanded, he strives to run the race, to finish strong, and to achieve the goal. But the goal has changed. The goal has changed from what it once had been. The race, then, has to be understood differently before it can be run. The new race that he has embraced, the race that he is asking them to embrace, would be meaningless without a change of perception.

Paul writes a letter that goes somewhat like this. “Dear Philippians, do you think it is about material things? Do you think it is about the flesh? Well, let me tell you, I had that covered and no one came close to me. I am a Jew, properly circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the Tribe of Benjamin, the kingly tribe, the tribe King Saul himself, my name sake, came out of. My lineage was in place.

I was a Hebrew of Hebrews. I was THE Hebrew of Hebrews! I had it all covered. As to the law, I was a Pharisee. As to zeal for my people, I was on mission to destroy this upstart church. As to righteousness under the law, I was blameless. I studied under Gamaliel himself, and was pre-ordained to be the next Rabbi to Rabbis. I had it all. No one compared. I. Had. It. All. Or so I perceived. And so the world perceived.”

And Paul did have it all, within that perception. He was the superstar. But that was the old perception. That was the old way of seeing things. Now he needed to tell the church in Philippi that they shouldn't get caught up in surface issues. Don't let the world define what is important. Don't even let the High Priest in Jerusalem do that.

Paul continued to put it into perspective in order to share his new received perception. It was a perception full of joy and hope and promise, which might have been comical if he had been standing physically in front of them. If he was there in front of them, they would have seen someone looking old beyond his years. Hunched over from the beatings that he had received and the hard floors of the prisons he had spent untold nights on. Crooked as the scars across his back tightened and reshaped his flesh. This Roman citizen, this Pharisee, heir to the seat, ministry,

and fame of Gamaliel himself, told whoever would listen, it all meant nothing. Nothing! It all meant nothing because he had gained everything, how did he put it...the surpassing worth of simply knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord. Paul had found something to which nothing in the world could compare.

He was no longer prisoner to the task of earning righteousness through perfect adherence to the law that he knew he couldn't do. The only goal left was to be like Jesus, to follow Christ, to run the race, to finish strong, to persevere, so that he might embrace real life. Perception. Perspective.

But, perception can be tricky. It can go both ways. Wrongly directed, it can be blinding instead of illuminating. In the final book of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series called *The Last Battle*, at the end, after the battle, Narnia is being remade by Aslan. The kingdom of Aslan, which is the Kingdom of Heaven for those who have not read the book, is being established.

Most of the characters, Peter, Edmund, Lucy, Eustace are in the new Narnia. They had entered through an old single stall stable on the old embattled side of Narnia and found themselves in a massive land with green grass and blue skies with a bright sun above and all sorts of exotic fruit in the trees. Looking back, they can still see the door through which they all had entered and they watched as others also came in. But they all didn't have the same experience. As it turned out, they didn't have the same perception.

Lucy points out a group of dwarfs huddled together, hunkered down on the ground in the grass with the sun blazing in the sky. As they come near to the dwarfs, Lucy and the rest realize that something isn't right. They can tell that for the dwarfs there is no light. Everything is dark for them. In fear and anger, they tilt their heads this way and that in order to listen for what they can't see.

Recognizing that they are not able to see, Lucy grabs a bunch of wild violets from the ground nearby in order to help them experience a bit of the wonder that she can see and experience in this place. But, when she puts them under the nose of one of them, he violently pushes them away and accuses her of putting manure in his face from the stable that they still think they are in. It is all about perception. It is not that they can't smell, but rather that their perception has been altered by their own doing.

Finally, Aslan shows up. Lucy, with tears in her eyes, pleads with Aslan to do something for the poor dwarfs. He tells Lucy that he will show her what he can ...and what he can't do for them. Magically a feast appears in middle of the dwarfs. Wonderful foods, sweet deserts, goblets of the best of wines. But when they start to eat and drink, to them the wine tasted like dirty water from the trough that the donkey drank from and the food appeared to them as rotten vegetables and stable droppings. The great feast that had been placed in front of them by Aslan, the Christ figure, eventually ends up as ammunition for a great food fight and their anger and

hatred erupts. As the food from the feast began to rot in the ground, Aslan explained that they have made their choice and their perception was set.

So what truth fills our lives and forms our perception? And what does our answer to that question show to the world. Do we say to the world through our words and actions that the wonderful wine that God has provided us is just dirty trough water. And the delicacies are stable, do we act like they are just droppings? Or do we share a joy, the same joy and perception that Paul was talking about when he wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, that comes from knowing Christ Jesus as our Lord?

What is it overflows out of our lives? The love of Christ? Or the curse of our poor choices?

Amen.